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ABSTRACT

The word "grammar" can be used in many ways: a general theory of language description; a theory for describing one language; a description of a particular language, either in the form of a book (an "English grammar") or the contents of that book; an ideal as opposed to actual description of a language; the properties and processes of a language that exist whether they are described or not; particular aspects of language such as syntax, morphology, or style; and prescriptive rules concerned with a standard of usage. Educators should teach language, and the English language in particular, because it is part of general knowledge; linguistics is a basic discipline with practical applications. Because attitudes and opinions on the English language affect images of self and others, greater understanding of it will eliminate or moderate prejudices, clarify issues under debate, help students refine their ability to adjust their language to the situational context, and give them the knowledge they need to analyze their own and others' writing. In spite of some contradictory evidence, experience leaves no doubt that instruction in grammatical structures, word order, and cohesion devices can improve student writing. Reading and foreign language learning can also benefit from such instruction. Therefore, to improve English instruction, college English teachers need intensive training or retraining in grammar. (JL)

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What is Grammar and Why Teach It?

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What is grammar? Well, the word grammar has many meanings. And that's not surprising, because common words generally have many meanings. Even as a technical term, grammar has more than one meaning.

One technical use of the term grammar appears in combinations such as transformational grammar, structuralist grammar, or stratificational grammar. In these combinations a grammar is a general theory of language description. More accurately, a combination such as transformational grammar refers to a set of related theories, related in that they share basic assumptions about the nature of language and agree on appropriate methods of argumentation. A theory of language description -- a grammar in this first sense -- is a model of how languages function and of ways to describe languages. Although theories of language are necessarily based on data from languages, they are not primarily concerned with the description of individual languages. Rather they are concerned with the nature of language as such and with the problems of investigating languages. Grammars in this first sense vary because the goals set for them vary. One obvious source of variation depends on the range of facts that the grammar is required to account for. For example, should the grammar deal with units larger than the sentence? Should it include variation according to region or social class? Should it take account of stylistic variation? To what extent should it consider individual differences within the same variety?

A general theory of language description may be applied to the study of universal grammar, the study of the characteristics that are common to all languages and of the sets of characteristics that are present or absent according to language type. From a general theory are also derived grammars of individual

CS207247

languages. Here again, grammar may be used in a second technical sense, this time denoting a theory for describing one language. For example, a transformational grammar of English and a tagmemic grammar of English are theories, derived from more general theoretical approaches, that attempt to characterize the English language. Linguists within the theory of tagmemic grammar (say) may argue over the formulations of rules in a tagmemic grammar of English that could account adequately for the observable language data.

In related third and fourth senses, an English grammar may refer to one description of the language. In a concrete sense, an English grammar is a book about English grammar. We can buy or borrow a grammar and we can compare two grammars for size or weight. But of course, we also use grammar for the contents of the books ("a grammar is a book about grammar"). In this fourth sense, we can compare two grammars for their accuracy, comprehensiveness, or insights. Since every grammar of English presupposes a theory of language description, however rudimentary or however inexplicit, this sense of grammar is related to the second sense. A transformational grammar of English may therefore refer either to an evolving theory or to a particular partial description based on one stage of the theory.

We must beware of confusing a grammar of English (the grammar contained in a grammar book) with the grammar of English, an ideally complete description of the language. The distinction between an actual description, grammar in the fourth sense, and an ideal description, grammar in the fifth sense, may be clearer if we consider dictionaries. You have probably heard people arguing whether a word exists in English or whether a word has a particular meaning. There will always be someone who wants to settle the dispute by looking up the word in a dictionary. And often that will be a good way of settling the dispute.

But we know (don't we?) that dictionaries differ in the number of entries, in the number of definitions, and in the phrasing of the definitions; a larger dictionary would obviously have more entries and, on average, more definitions per entry than a smaller dictionary. Some definitions will be clearer and more precise than others. We might be aware that even unabridged dictionaries don't contain the latest words or latest meanings, and may omit older words or meanings. In principle, we can't be confident that the absence of words or meanings in a dictionary proves their absence from the language, if only because innovations may appear between the time of compilation of the dictionary and the time that it is published or --later still -- the time we consult it. And of course, dictionary editors may simply have failed to record innovations, just as they may have failed to record more established words and meanings. Or they may have decided that they have not found enough instances to justify its inclusion. Actual dictionaries then are defective, in contrast with the ideal dictionary, which contains all the words in use at any one time and defines them perfectly. Like dictionaries, grammar books vary in their coverage, and we would similarly expect larger grammars to be more comprehensive than smaller ones, and some formulations of rules to be more accurate than others. And like dictionaries, no grammar book is complete.

I have just emphasized the distinction between a grammar (a particular description appearing in a book) and the grammar (an ideally complete description), both grammars presupposing a particular theory of description. I want to make a further distinction, which is sometimes blurred: the difference between a description and what is being described. Let me make an analogy with physics. The word physics refers to a particular field of study, a science in which experiments and theories have accumulated over several centuries. But the word physics can also refer to the processes and properties that are studied. So,

the physics of the nucleus may refer either to the study of the physical process and properties of the nucleus or to the physical processes and properties themselves. The physical properties and processes exist irrespective of whether they have been shown to exist by experiments. Advances in physics represent more refined experiments and more comprehensive theories. Similarly, the grammar of the English noun phrase may refer either to the study of English noun phrases or to the properties of English noun phrases and the processes involved in forming them. English grammar in this sixth sense exists irrespective of whether it is observed and recorded. Advances in the study of English grammar represent more accurate and more detailed observations and recordings and more comprehensive theories that will encompass and -- at least for some general theoretical approaches -- also explain what has been discovered.

And that brings me to another important point -- and one that is very relevant to the question of teaching grammar. I have just said that English grammar exists irrespective of whether it is observed and recorded. In this sense, grammar refers to the properties and processes that underlie the use of the language -- that underlie the ability of speakers to speak and understand the language. Speakers of English must know English grammar in this sense in order to communicate in English; the ability to speak English presupposes a knowledge of the rules of the language, a knowledge that is stored within the brain. For example, if we can form questions in English, we must know the rules for forming English questions. That doesn't mean, however, that we can say what the rules are. We don't need to study English grammar -- we don't need to be able to analyse the language -- to be able to speak English. Knowledge of grammar in this sense is below the level of consciousness and is different from the conscious knowledge of grammar that we obtain from studying grammar. We acquire our working knowledge of the language through exposure to the language from early childhood. There are numerous languages for which

grammars have never been compiled or have been compiled only recently. People were speaking and writing English, of course, long before the first English grammars appeared at the end of the sixteenth century.

In this sixth sense of grammar -- the knowledge that underlies language use -- individual speakers of the language have different grammars that correspond to their production and comprehension of the language. It is obvious that the vocabularies of individual speakers vary -- the number of words they know and the meanings they ascribe to the words they know. But individuals may vary in other aspects of language use; for example, in the syntactic constructions they are capable of using and understanding. Furthermore, there may be variations in their uses of particular features of the language. For example, some say/ grisi/ and others / grizr/. Some use dove as the past of dive and others dived. Some can say That ashtray seems Wedgewood, while others would have to say That ashtray seems to be Wedgewood. Some may occasionally use inversion for the conditional -- Had I known -- while others use only If I had known. Some say You ought not tell him, others You ought not to tell him. And the same individual may use both variants on different occasions.

When a large number of variants coincide in a group of speakers, we recognize a distinctive variety or dialect of the language. Language varieties may correlate with separate regions, socio-economic levels, ethnic groups, educational levels, or with a combination of characteristics in their speakers. For each variety, linguists can compose a separate grammar -- a separate description to account for the use of the language by speakers of that variety. Individual variation within a variety may also be taken into account. Indeed, it is possible to formulate grammars for individual speakers, for the works of one author, or for one literary work. If the general theory allows the possibility, one grammar might account for all variations. And the grammar might also

distinguish stylistic variation; for example, differences between the spoken and written language or differences between casual and more formal styles. In practice, however, most theories assume a considerable degree of idealization, in particular ignoring individual differences and stylistic differences.

Just as ~~at any one time~~ there is considerable language variation at any one period, so ~~over the course of time~~ there is variation from one period to the next. The two types of variation are related, in that some variants from an earlier period become dominant at a later period, moving from one variety into general use. Or one variant disappears. For example, both negative forms I know not and I don't know coexisted in the 16th century, until one form came to be used exclusively. And so we have different grammars for different periods.

Language change also occurs within the same speakers over their lifetime, though some adult speakers are resistant to certain types of changes. The changes are most conspicuous in the early years, when the language is being acquired. The grammar of a child of three -- grammar in the sense of the knowledge that underlies the child's speech and understanding of the language -- is very different from the grammar of the same child at the age of four, and that again will be very different from the child's grammar at the age of five. Similarly, the grammars of foreign learners of English will change as they progress in their acquisition of the language. It is possible to formulate grammars to represent the grammars at different stages of first and second language acquisition.

I want to reiterate the distinction between my fifth sense of grammar -- an ideally complete description of the language -- and my sixth sense -- the knowledge underlying the use of the language. The distinction is particularly important when we refer to the rules of grammar. Even if the rules of grammar formulated by linguists were comprehensive, they would not necessarily coincide with the processes that speakers use in producing and understanding utterances or with the ways in which they store language information in the brain. In

formulating rules, linguists are motivated by criteria such as simplicity or economy. And their formulations differ according to their theoretical persuasion. We may make an analogy with dictionaries in this respect. Words in a dictionary are usually listed alphabetically, but we have no reason to expect that words are stored alphabetically in the brain. In the processes that occur in actual use, other criteria may apply than those that motivate linguists in writing their grammars or lexicographers in compiling their dictionaries; for example, ease of access to the language store and ease of processing, limitations on short-term memory, and associations of words or structures. Furthermore, it may well be that individuals employ different processes and strategies.

So far I have discussed six senses of the word grammar and each sense refers to all aspects of the language. But there are more restricted references. One common traditional use of grammar, both technical and popular, restricts it to morphology -- the forms of words -- and syntax -- the relationships of words in larger units. This use excludes other areas of language description, for example phonology (the distinctive sounds of the language) and semantics (the meanings of words and combinations of words). Another common use, again both technical and popular, identifies grammar with syntax alone. Both these uses yield several permutations of grammar in the earlier senses. For example, syntax (the synonym of grammar in one use) may refer to a theory, or to a book, or to a description, or to the knowledge underlying syntactic use. In addition, there are several popular uses of the word grammar. A very restricted use is illustrated in a statement such as:

English is easier to learn than German,

because it has hardly any grammar.

What is meant is that English has hardly any inflections. Again, I often hear people criticizing the grammar in someone else's writing when they mean that the writing is unclear or clumsy. Here grammar is equivalent to style. And that may well be the most usual popular sense of grammar. On the other hand, grammar has

a wider range of meaning when a lesson in grammar includes the study of punctuation, spelling, and vocabulary.

Finally, we come to the use of grammar in statements such as:

It's bad grammar to use hopefully as a sentence adverb.

It's incorrect grammar to put a preposition at the end of a sentence.

Here, grammar refers to a way of speaking or writing that is to be preferred or avoided. Statements of this kind pertain to prescriptive grammar, a set of rules about language that tell speakers or writers what they should or should not say or write. The rules usually cover selected features of syntax and morphology. Other examples of such rules are:

Don't use contact as a verb.

It's wrong to say between you and I.

Don't begin a sentence with and.

It's correct to use either a plural or a singular verb if the subject is none.

It's acceptable to use It's me in speech.

The rules of grammar in our earlier senses of grammar are descriptive rules; like the laws of physics they are generalizations based on observations of the data. The rules of prescriptive grammar are regulations, based on evaluations of what is correct or incorrect. Descriptive rules are accurate or inaccurate, depending on whether they accurately reflect the data. Prescriptive rules are justified or unjustified, depending on whether they accurately reflect attitudes to the specified features for particular contexts. Prescriptive rules in English are concerned with Standard English, the set of varieties that is associated with educated speakers of English, particularly with the written English of such speakers. Since educated English speakers, like all other sets of speakers, vary in their use of the language, some usages are in dispute. And since, unlike some countries, we don't have a language Academy that pronounces on disputed usages, individual writers have established themselves as language

authorities to decide on disputed usages. Such authorities base their decisions on their own attitudes or on the attitudes of other self-proclaimed authorities. It is no wonder that they sometimes disagree or sometimes attack usages about which there is little or no dispute. Such complaints, however, may eventually have an effect on those who consult usage authorities, persuading some people to avoid certain usages, at least in their formal writing. Over the last century prescriptive rules have accumulated into a general prescriptive tradition that is embodied, with some variation, in school textbooks and handbooks and in usage guides for the general public.

I have so far responded in some detail to the question "What is Grammar?" I now turn to the second and more controversial question "Why teach grammar?" Since we have seen that grammar has many senses, I will select three formulations of that question: Why teach about language, and specifically about the English language? Why teach about English syntax in particular? And why teach prescriptive grammar and about prescriptive grammar?

In responding to these questions, I will not be attempting to outline a curriculum for each grade or to recommend teaching methods. I will instead be considering in general the teaching of language in school, whether in grade school, high school, or (for some students) college freshman classes in English.

Why should we teach about language, and specifically about the English language? My first response is that it is a part of general knowledge. We should learn about ourselves and the world we live in, and therefore we should learn about language. For language is both our most personal possession (Every individual's language is unique to some extent) and at the same time a facility that contributes most to our relationships with others (It is the major means of human communication). Language is distinctive to human beings. Animal languages are called such by analogy with human language; none approach the marvellous complexity and flexibility of human language.

My second response is that linguistics (the study of language in all its aspects) is a basic discipline. Just as mathematics is important for the physical sciences, so linguistics is important for the social sciences and the humanities. Its relationship to other disciplines is evident in the hybrid disciplines that focus on language: psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, the sociology of language, anthropological linguistics, linguistic philosophy, the philosophy of language, philology, and stylistics. Linguistics has practical applications in areas as diverse as the teaching of languages, the teaching of the deaf, speech therapy, the diagnosis and treatment of aphasia, communications engineering, information retrieval, and the identification of author or speaker in legal cases. The study of language also provides a useful introduction to research methods and argumentation in the sciences, since language data are readily available: students can immediately draw on knowledge of their own language and can easily collect samples of the language of others.

We all have conscious or subconscious attitudes to the English language and opinions on specific features. These attitudes and opinions affect our image of ourselves and of others -- enhancing or undermining our sense of linguistic security and promoting solidarity with some and hostility toward others. While similarities in language reinforce social cohesion, differences may be socially divisive. Prejudices about language impinge on our everyday lives, determining in part our attitudes to individuals and groups. Attitudes to the language influence public policy toward the teaching of nonstandard speakers of English or of bilingual speakers. Opinions on the nature of the English language and how it's learned, on language variation and language change, have an impact on the content of the English curriculum, on methods of teaching English, and on competency tests for teachers and students. Greater understanding will eliminate or moderate prejudices, and clarify issues under debate.

Study of the English language can help students to develop and refine their ability to adjust their language to the situational context. To be effective in our social relationships we must use language that is appropriate to the medium of communication, to our status relative to other participants in the situation, to the type of language activity, and to the purpose of the communication. In this respect we are all multivarietal, varying our language to suit the occasion. But we differ in our competence to vary our language appropriately. Children gradually learn from the reactions of others what are the effects of different choices from the resources of the language. Study of the language can make them more aware of this type of variation and can increase their control of the language.

I said earlier that we acquire our knowledge of the language through exposure to the language from early childhood. But the differences between the spoken and written language are such that we have to learn separately how to read and write effectively. Public writing -- in contrast to some personal writing -- is normally in Standard English, and this poses special difficulties for nonstandard speakers. But even those who speak some variety of Standard English have to learn the conventions of written Standard English. By this I mean not only that they must learn the conventions of spelling and punctuation; I mean not only that they must recognize that there are words and structures that tend to occur exclusively or far more frequently in written English; I also mean that writers must be constantly aware of the absence of the intended reader or readers, an absence that requires greater explicitness of language. ~~but~~ At the same time they must recognize that written texts are expected to have a tighter organization and less redundancy. The reader, in turn, must learn to infer the attitude of the writer to both audience and subject matter and also to vary the degree of attention to the

purpose for reading -- sometimes reading closely, but sometimes skimming for a summary or scanning for particular information. For an analysis of their own writing and of the writing of others, students require a knowledge of both linguistic and rhetorical categories. While many students acquire competence in reading and writing on their own through exposure to varieties of written English and through constant practice in writing, all will be helped by teaching of the language of written English.

When teachers and parents consider the question of the teaching of grammar in school they are mainly thinking of the teaching of syntax. Why should we teach English grammar in this sense? What I've already said about the teaching of language and English language answers that question too, since syntax is a part of the study of language. Indeed of all the components of language, syntax occupies a central position, mediating between sound and meaning and providing a framework into which words fit. With a very little instruction and a little practice, students can learn to consult a dictionary for the pronunciation and spelling of words or to find meanings for words, and they can consult a thesaurus or a dictionary of synonyms and antonyms to find words for meanings. It is much more difficult to consult grammar books for the functions of syntactic structures or for the effects of selecting one syntactic structure in preference to another. The difficulty lies in great part in the large number of syntactic terms and in the circularity of their definitions, a circularity that arises from the fact that syntactic categories are interrelated in sets of systems and accordingly their definitions are interrelated. For example, an adequate definition of the syntactic word-class noun requires reference to the functions of nouns as subject, direct object, indirect object, object of a preposition, premodifier in a noun phrase, etc; the definition of a subject requires reference to its typical realization by a noun phrase; the definition of a noun phrase requires reference to the noun

as its head. And so on. The central importance of syntax combined with the difficulty of understanding syntactic works requires that a substantial amount of time be devoted to the teaching of syntax if students are to derive substantial benefits from their study of the subject. Of course the amount of terminology to be taught at any one stage depends on the intellectual level of the students. But we should be no more reluctant to teach terms in grammar than we are in physics and chemistry.

Can instruction in grammar (in the sense of syntax) improve writing? Certainly, several studies have been cited as proof that instruction in grammar does not improve writing and may even have a harmful effect in that it takes away time from writing practice. However, a recent article in College Composition and Communication has argued that the research in these studies is defective or the results have been misinterpreted, and therefore the studies do not provide evidence for the effect of grammar instruction on writing (Martha Kolln, "Closing the Books on Alchemy," College Composition and Communication 1981, 32.139-51). On the basis of my own experience as a teacher and a writer, I have no doubt that a study of grammatical structures, word order, and cohesion devices, can improve written style. For this purpose, grammar has to be applied to texts written by students or others. And teachers and students have to understand grammatical categories in order to generalize as well as to discuss specific textual details. A conscious study of grammatical resources will make them readily available during the conscious acts of rewriting, but it will also enrich the choices available during the initial acts of writing, choices that are often not made at the conscious level.

A knowledge of grammar has other applications in the classroom. One obvious application is for reading: the interpretation of literary and nonliterary texts

sometimes depends crucially on grammatical analysis. Secondly, recognition of grammatical structure is often necessary for conventional punctuation. And finally, a study of one's native grammar is helpful for a study of the grammar of a foreign language.

Prescriptive grammar cannot be ignored by the schools, if only because of the prominence given to it in school handbooks, in guides to usage, and in the columns of newspapers and magazines. It should be placed in proper perspective. Students should know that certain usages evoke strongly emotional reactions in some educated speakers, but are acceptable to others. To the extent that the distinction is known, teachers should discriminate between usages that are disturbing to the majority of educated speakers and those that irritate or anger small minorities. And they should delimit the stylistic contexts to which the prescriptive rules apply. Students should learn about the origins of prescriptive rules, the arguments offered for them, the preservation or loss of rules when the language changes or attitudes change, and the disagreements among usage authorities. Most adults encounter grammar only in the guise of prescriptive rules dogmatically proclaimed by usage authorities. An understanding of prescriptive grammar will help to ward off linguistic insecurity engendered by the baffling conflict between prescriptive rules and actual usage. If people want to follow prescriptive rules, they can then do so intelligently.

In its widest sense, prescriptive grammar goes beyond the relatively closed list of rules for disputed usages in Standard English. It extends to all grammar instruction that stipulates what language should be used, what avoided, and what preferred. In schools prescriptive instruction in this sense covers matters that are not in dispute for Standard English; for example, the general rules for subject-verb agreement and pronoun reference, or the forms of irregular verbs. Such instruction should be given for the written language, where varieties

of Standard English are the norm. The rules should reflect accurately the descriptive rules for Standard English, but would be framed prescriptively to counter errors that occur frequently in student writing, errors of course within the grammar of Standard English. The type of rules that would be included would vary with the needs of particular groups of students.

The teaching of grammar in any of the senses that I have been discussing presupposes adequate training of teachers of English. Unfortunately, most prospective teachers come to college with little or no knowledge of grammar. They belong to a generation that was rarely taught grammar in either grade or high school. One or two introductory courses in language are therefore insufficient to provide a secure basis for teaching. Changes in the quality of teaching in the schools must await the recognition by legislatures, school boards, schools of education, and school administrators of the need for intensive training of prospective teachers and for intensive retraining of present teachers.